

2013 FEDERAL EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNER

Category 12 - Worksite Wellness Champion

People's Garden Coordinators

USDA Food and Nutrition Service

FACTOR I - JOB COMPETENCE

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in the Midwest Region has successfully created and maintained a local piece of a global USDA initiative - the People's Garden. USDA created the People's Garden initiative in 2009 to encourage its staff from around the world to volunteer in community gardens in an effort to symbolize the important connection between people and their land. In 2012, USDA staff created and maintained 1,865 People's Gardens that produced over 3.1 million pounds of food. This initiative promotes the consumption of fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables, one of the key messages in USDA's well known *My Plate* nutrition education tool. The Midwest Region not only promotes wellness efforts among Federal employees through its People's Garden, but among underserved populations in Chicago.

Background

The Food and Nutrition Service in Chicago created its own People's Garden in 2009 by developing a unique partnership between the agency and the Chicago Botanic Garden's Windy City Harvest Program. Windy City Harvest runs several organic gardens in some of Chicago's most socially and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. It is also the main site for the Chicago's Vocational Rehabilitation Impact Center, which provides transitional job training for disadvantaged youth. The hands-on training teaches individuals how to grow and harvest organic fruits and vegetables, and how to maintain a profitable community garden and composting operation. These are valuable skills in the current environment where the demand is high for local, healthy, organic and heirloom crops. The Midwest Region People's Garden is located in the West Garfield Park neighborhood. The garden produces a variety of crops including Swiss chard, kale, collards, purple carrots, tomatoes, peppers, and edible flowers. Many of these vegetables contain the nutrients that are lacking in most American diets.

Impact

The People's Garden coordinating team, Samia Hamdan and Tina Kopec, have shown great results and sincere dedication to the mission over and above their outstanding performance of their regularly assigned duties. The team promoted the People's Garden to over 100 Federal staff and engaged 25% of them in volunteering. The duo created intriguing promotional emails, exciting kick-off events, and helped organize staff to volunteer in the garden on a regular basis. The team has worked with senior leadership to allow staff the time to participate in the garden and to keep the initiative going year after year. The team also partnered with staff at the Environmental Protection Agency which expanded the volunteer base. Samia and Tina serve as liaisons with Windy City Harvest to maintain a dynamic volunteer and event schedule. Thanks to their dedication and leadership, volunteers cover a two-hour weekly shift from May to September to help plant, weed, maintain, and harvest crops at the People's Garden. The team's knowledge and enthusiasm for organic gardening is contagious as more and more volunteers are excited about getting involved in a good cause and adding some exercise to their workdays. The People's Garden is now in its fifth year and it keeps expanding both in the size of production as well as in the number of volunteers.

The People's Garden not only engages the Federal and local community in the act of gardening, but it also has healthful impacts on Federal employees who volunteer in the garden. Samia and Tina have worked hard over the past year to promote the Garden, monitor the level of volunteer support each week, engage new volunteers, encourage exercise, promote consumption of fruits and vegetables, and celebrate a successful harvest. The team engaged staff in organic gardening as a way to increase exercise and get fresh air and sunshine during the workday. The successful People's Garden reminded staff to buy local produce at farmers markets and encouraged them to try new vegetables and to try growing vegetables and composting at home which several staff have started doing.

FACTOR II – IMPACT

The People's Garden is a unique worksite wellness program. It promotes fresh fruit and vegetable consumption and physical activity, by *actively engaging* staff in gardening activities rather than solely providing educational messages. The People's Garden directly supports FNS' mission of improving nutrition and health among all Americans. It also actively promotes the key messages of the First Lady's *Let's Move!* initiative, which are to increase access to healthy food and increase physical activity. The gardening activities also reinforce the messages of the Federal *2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and the USDA *My Plate* educational tool, by promoting fruit and vegetable consumption. And finally, through gardening activities, Federal employees can get active and meet the recommendations of the Federal *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines*. Through promotional emails, Samia and Tina have provided nutrition tips and recipes, and reminded employees about how the People's Garden ties back to USDA nutrition recommendations. The People's Garden serves as only one aspect of the many activities that the Midwest Region staff participate in to improve nutrition, fitness, and teamwork.

Activities and Impact

Samia and Tina have worked together for over a year to successfully promote healthy eating and physical activity for staff at the Food and Nutrition Service Midwest Region. They scheduled a kick-off event with a slide show, door prizes and allowed people to share their experiences of gardening with new volunteers. The co-coordinators also reached out to another Federal agency, the Environmental Protection Agency, to partner with them and expand volunteer opportunities to their staff. This first meeting generated enthusiasm and curiosity and resulted in 24 volunteer gardeners from two Federal agencies offering over 100 hours of on-site service and oversight. Throughout the season, Samia and Tina made sure that the volunteers were able to schedule time and obtain transportation to the site to ensure coverage at the People's Garden. They kept the staff excited about various Garden events, challenges, recipes, and harvests. At the end of the year, they organized a harvest celebration and provided healthy snacks for all the guests. This kind of contribution of hands-on help really energizes the staff and gets people excited about trying new foods, growing vegetables, buying organic produce, while supporting the great mission of our agency – improving access to nutritious, affordable food.

Success

The People's Garden is just one of several Windy City Harvest garden sites that contribute to a massive amount of produce. In 2012, the gardens sold over 36,000 pounds of healthy, fresh food, and donated another 33,000 pounds to local pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, and other community organizations! That's nearly two semi-tractor trailers full of healthy food!

In addition to donating several thousand pounds of produce, the People's Garden has helped engage Federal employees in weekly physical activity and community service. It has also helped them learn valuable gardening tips, and encouraged them to cook more fresh produce at home. Several FNS staff members have been inspired to cook many of the vegetables they helped grow in the People's Garden. This is the fifth annual year for the People's Garden, and we anticipate another year of success.